Why Aren't My Prayers Being Answered?

Dr. David Kyle Foster

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by Dr. David Kyle Foster

(Biblical Theology Series)

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[The Bible translation used is the ESV except where otherwise noted.]

Putting the Question

It is a great frustration to ask God for something and not get an answer. We pray for a friend to be healed, yet watch in horror as they die from a disease. We ask for a relative to get saved only to see them dive even deeper into sin. We pray for the future of a child only to see them perish from some tragic accident or self-inflicted wound. We plead for God to liberate us from a harmful situation, yet see no rescue. Or we press God for deliverance from a demonic stronghold or intransigent habit, yet see no change.

What makes it worse is that we read of people in the Bible who received swift answers to prayer. Others received answers, but had to persist in asking for months, years or even a lifetime. Still others died without seeing answer.

Know this: life is a battle where even the holiest and most faithful of believers are forced to struggle with the trial of unanswered prayer.

These are the times that try men's souls….. the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly….

(Thomas Paine)

A Biblical Perspective

There is no “one-size-fits-all” reason for unanswered prayer. Every situation is different, as is the spiritual life of every petitioner. There are clear principles, however, that should give us some understanding.

It’s important to realize that the answer to some of our prayers may only come after we’ve gone to heaven. Why? One reason is that answered prayer needs to operate within the constrictions of the free will choices of everyone involved. For example, the answer to prayer for the salvation of a loved one can never be the product of divine coercion. Nor can it be manipulated by the emotion-driven timetable of the petitioner.

God has ways of arranging circumstances that make a positive decision compellingly attractive, however. Parents do the same thing when trying to feed an uncooperative baby. When all has failed, they pretend that the spoon is an airplane coming in for a landing. The child becomes so delighted with the game that he “opens the hangar” so that the plane can land! The final decision is the child’s, yet it is his new perspective that brings it about.

When we pray for something that is consistent with His revealed will, such as the salvation of a loved one (1 Timothy 2:4; Acts 16:31), God begins to work immediately even though we may see no evidence of it. Why the delay? Because there is more to realizing the answer than meets the eye.

On one occasion, the prophet Daniel fasted and prayed for his people for three weeks. Eventually, an angel appeared to him to explain that although the answer had already been dispatched, Satan had run interference by fomenting a battle in the heavenlies - a fight that took God’s angels three weeks to win.

Ultimately, the silence of God when we pray forces us to decide once and for all whether or not He is good. As Oswald Chambers wrote: “The core of all sin is the doubt that God is good”.

Self-Deception

Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that we want deliverance from a sin when we really don't. For example - I prayed for years to be freed from the power of a besetting sin (Hebrews 12:1-2) and got no relief. One night, the Spirit of God fell on me and I instantly knew that He had finally answered my prayer. My first thought was "Finally God, thank you!" but my second thought was "Oh no!"

You see, in that moment, I came face to face with the fact that I enjoyed the sin more than I loved God. I loved the pleasure and the temporary comfort that it brought. I was still dependent on it rather than God to weather the deep brokenness in me that remained unhealed. In essence, I had been pleading with God with tears, for years, for something I didn't really want.

After we have finally matured enough to mean business, God will then deliver us from the snare of the fowler (Psalm 91:3). In the meantime, we should pray for God to work in us a genuine desire to be free (Philippians 2:12-23).

On occasion, God doesn't give us *what we want when we want it* because He sees in our heart that we are not yet ready to value and/or shepherd the answer - that once things get too hard, we will forsake what has been done for us. Jesus spoke of this in His parable of the seeds sown on rocky, thorny and good soil (Matthew 13:18-23). From God's perspective, the blood of His Son makes everything that His death and resurrection achieved very precious indeed.

In so many cases, God is trying to protect us from ourselves. We learn a very important principle in 2 Peter 2:20-22 - that for those who have tasted of the holy gift of divine forgiveness and who return to a life of sin, it is better for them not to have known the way of righteousness. A similar sentiment can be found in Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:37-39, Galatians 4:8-9 and Luke 9:62. In His mercy, God withholds the answer so as not to put us in that position.

Reasons for Unanswered Prayer

The Bible has much to say about prayer. Let's examine some of the things that could delay or prevent an answer.

1. Salvation: You are not yet a true believer and thus have no "standing" before God.

God may answer one or more of your prayers as a means to draw you to Christ, but for the most part, intimate interaction with God requires submission to the covenant that God has offered to those who surrender their life to His Son, Jesus Christ.

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

(Acts 2:38)

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

(Acts 4:12)

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

(John 14:6)

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:4-7)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

(John 3:16-18)

2. Guarding Your Heart and Mind: You may not have properly engaged in the battle through guarding your heart and mind and are therefore not ready to participate in the answer.

There are more than 1,500 promises in Scripture that are conditional - "*If* you do this, *then* I will do that".

(See Psalm 37:4; Ephesians 6:2; Proverbs 3:5-6; Isaiah 1:19; 26:3; Jeremiah 29:13; Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 28:1; John 3:16; Revelation 3:20, et al.)

The Bible has what I call a "pearls before swine" principle - that God will not give what is valuable to those who do not regard it as valuable (Matthew 7:6). If you want an answer but not the responsibilities that go with the answer then don't expect a positive response.

One good example of this is when a person pleads for freedom from a sinful bondage while being unwilling to obey the related command - to "guard your heart and mind" from the things that can reawaken sin.

This would include governing the media that you look at, listen to, the people you hang with and any other way of ingesting things that give birth to sinful thoughts and predispositions of the heart and mind.

It would also include the incorporation of spiritual disciplines that fortify godly thoughts and deeds, and that help protect them from worldly ways of thinking and acting.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:7)

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

(Philippians 3:19)

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because He trusts in you.

(Isaiah 26:3)

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

(2 Corinthians 10:5)

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

(Proverbs 4:23)

3. Renewing Your Mind: You may still need to obey God's directive to pursue the renewing of your mind.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

(Psalm 51:10)

As we've already seen, your salvation and its accompanying access to God has been purchased with the precious blood of His Son (1 Peter 1:13-21). As a result, answers to prayer are not distributed to those who lightly regard them - as though they were a string of cheap beads at Mardi Gras.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

(Colossians 3:2-3)

The renewal of the mind takes place in the secret place with God and it manifests in our cooperation with Him in all things. It is fortified with worship, prayer, fellowship with His people, and the regular reading and teaching of Scripture. As the song *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* says, in coming to know and love Him more, "the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace".

And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

(Matthew 22:37-38)

4. Understanding: Your understanding of what brings about answered prayer may be incomplete.

Many Bible teachers and preachers have an inadequate view of how answers to prayer get triggered. Rather than consulting the whole counsel of Scripture, they latch on to one factor as though it were the only one. It is important that we seek God for any and *every* reason why our prayers haven't been

answered.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

(Acts 17:11)

Countless scriptures speak of God's desire to reveal these and other mysteries to us, including Daniel 2:19, 22, 28, 47; Job 12:22; Jeremiah 33:3; Ephesians 1:9; and 1 Corinthians 2:9-10.

Scriptures that speak about God's revelation of the secrets of the heart can be found in Psalm 44:21; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 8:27; and 1 Corinthians 14:25.

5. Quenching or Grieving the Holy Spirit: You may still be living in ongoing, unrepentant sin, or are in other ways quenching or grieving the Holy Spirit by your thoughts, words, beliefs or actions.

Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

(Isaiah 59:1-2)

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

(Ephesians 4:28-32)

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

(1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the

righteous will be granted.

(Proverbs 10:24)

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

(Psalm 66:18)

Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

(Isaiah 59:1-2)

Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.

(1 John 3:8-9)

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him.

(1 John 3:21-22)

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments……Whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me…..If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching…..He who does not love Me will not obey My teaching.

(John 14:15, 21, 23-24)

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

(1 Peter 3:12)

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward Him.

(2 Chronicles 16:9)

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

(Hebrews 10:36)

(See also Isaiah 55:18; Matthew 5:24)

The antidote to this problem is to *immerse* your self in the Word of God and in intimate fellowship with the Father with the goal of developing heartfelt, love-driven obedience.

A big part of this is intimate praise and worship, for as the Scripture says……

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

(2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

The ability to obey God is a function of your faith in His power to keep you from falling (Jude 24) and your willingness to turn to Him in abject dependence at each moment of temptation. For more on this, go to the article, "Hating Evil".

6. Marital Strife: Your earthly marriage may be characterized by anger and unforgiveness.

A very important subset of the above principle of obedience is this one - the problem of sinning against one's spouse without repentance.

Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

(1 Peter 3:7)

In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

(Ephesians 4:26-27, NIV)

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

(Ephesians 4:32, NIV)

7. Love of the World: You may be, in a sense, withholding your love for God by holding on to a love of the world.

Where you put your time, money and attention reveals where your heart truly lies.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

(1 John 2:15)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

(James 4:4)

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

(John 3:19)

8. Unforgiveness: You may be withholding forgiveness from one or more people.

It may take some time in the most egregious cases, (child abuse, murder, etc), but forgiveness is a non-negotiable command in Scripture with serious consequences for noncompliance. If you find yourself unable to forgive, ask God and He will enable you.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

(Ephesians 4:31-32)

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

(Matthew 5:24b)

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

(Mark 11:25-26)

…. forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if

you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

(Matthew 6:12-15)

It is important that the forgiveness that you extend to others be genuine rather than mere words spoken to fulfill the letter of the law.

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

(Matthew 18:35)

Many in the world today teach what Dietrich Bonhoeffer labeled "cheap grace" - that is, grace that does not change the heart, empower and motivate the natural fruit of obedience.

The Apostle James described such counterfeit grace this way in his epistle…..

Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves…..being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts…..Faith apart from works is useless…..(Abraham's) faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works…..Faith apart from works is dead.

(James 1:22-25, 2:18-24)

And so good works, though often a process, is inevitable for the one who truly believes.

(See also Acts 5:32; Romans 1:5; 2:8; 16:26; Ephesians 2:10; 5:9; 1 John 2:4-5)

9. Lack of Reconciliation: You may have neglected or refused to seek reconciliation with someone you have sinned against or who has sinned against you.

When the person refuses to be reconciled to you, the best you can do is make a sincere attempt or two. God will not hold you responsible in such a case.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

(Matthew 5:23-24)

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

(Hebrews 12:14, NIV)

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

(2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

10. Lack of Reverence: Your prayers may be casual, high-handed, cavalier, impolite or in some other way not in accordance with the majesty of God.

Many of us use God as though He were Santa Claus or some kind of butler. We contact Him when we want something but ignore Him when we don't. This is unimaginably disrespectful to the God of all glory.

In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence.

(Hebrews 5:7)

An even worse form of irreverent posture toward God in prayer is a sense of entitlement by the petitioner. That sort of arrogance will never obtain a positive answer from the Lord of Glory.

11. Doubt: You may not be asking in faith.

If you don't trust someone's word, then you will not listen to or value what they have to say.

Faith is based first on God's character, and secondly, on the knowledge of His Word.

If you don't know what a person has said, then you don't know what to believe. Therefore, accurately dividing God's Word is indispensable, as is learning to hear His voice in other ways: through visions (Acts 2:17, 2 Kings 6:14-17), dreams (Acts 2:17; Genesis 31:24; Matthew 2:13; Daniel 2:27-28), mental images (John 1:48), His audible voice (Mark 1:11; Acts 9:3-6), and/or His still small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13; 1 Samuel 3:9-11).

Abraham believed God because he believed in His righteous character. He then acted in accordance with that belief and obeyed (Hebrews 4:12; 11:8-10).

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

(2 Timothy 2:15)

In (Christ), you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

(Ephesians 1:13)

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

(James 1:6-8)

Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

(Mark 11:24)

Faith is a knowing that is so certain that you assume that your prayer is being answered even before you have seen evidence of it, simply because it is something that God has promised. This makes spending regular time in the Scriptures and in pursuit of the Lord vital to learning what those promises are so that you can be inspired to believe them.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

(Hebrews 11:1)

"Hope" is a component of biblical faith. It is a confident expectation and firm assurance concerning something promised by God, though still unseen.

A lack of faith will give birth to counterfeit hope, which is the same as a *wish* or an "I'll believe it when I see it" posture.

As mentioned already, faith is grounded in the certainty of God's truthfulness, which is as much a constituent part of God's Being as is love (John 14:6; 17:17). For the Scripture says, "God is not a man that He should lie" (Numbers 23:19). In fact, He *cannot* lie (Titus 1:2; John 14:30).

In the Greek, "faith" means: "being persuaded or convicted" by what God has spoken to you, primarily through your intimate communion with Him and through His Word.

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

(Romans 10:17)

The Greek word for "hearing" means: "paying attention to; giving audience to; or understanding".

When you were a kid and your mom yelled at you for breaking one of the rules, she may have said, "Do you *hear* me?" Of course, what she meant was, "Have you been paying close enough attention that you completely understand and will obey from this point forward?"

Let's rehearse some of the primary scriptures about faith…….

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

(James 1:5-8)

…..Why could we not cast it (the demon) out? (Jesus) said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

(Matthew 17:19-21)

Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

(Hebrews 11:6)

The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

(James 5:15)

One important caveat: In some situations, such as the death of a child, a parent can experience feelings of guilt for "not having had enough faith". Such feelings can be the result of them not being trained in discerning the difference between the lying thoughts of demons, their own self-critical thoughts and the voice of God. However, condemnation is the devil's game and a sure sign of his voice. God would never interject such a condemning thought (Romans 8:1).

False guilt can also come from preachers or teachers who place "a lack of faith" above all other reasons. Yet in Jesus' ministry, many were healed, delivered, raised from the dead, etc. who did not exhibit any faith whatsoever!

There are all kinds of reasons why God might receive someone into heaven earlier than expected - most of them to the benefit of that person. It could be

that had the person lived longer, they might have developed a debilitating condition, fallen into despair, taken their own life, lost their faith, renounced God, or fallen into serious and unrepentant sin.

We must always trust that God is in control of our fate.

From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.

(Acts 17:26-27, NIV)

Man's days are determined; You have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.

(Job 14:5, NIV)

All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.

(Psalm 139:16b, NIV)

God wants to maximize our experience in heaven. And so, it may be that the day we graduate to heaven is chosen by God to be the day when our spiritual life and growth reaches its zenith. Consequently, for us to be taken by God at that point is the best thing that could happen to us.

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work in us…..

(Ephesians 3:20, NIV)

12. A Lack of Persistence: You may not have gone to the length of being importunate or tenacious in your asking.

In Genesis 32:22-31, Jacob had to *wrestle* with God in order to receive an answer to his prayer.

Jesus has promised……

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

(Matthew 7:7-8)

(Your friend in need) will answer, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up

and give you anything?" I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

(Luke 11:7-10)

In the Bible, we find examples of prayers that have not been answered because the petitioner has not been earnest and persistent in their request.

And He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

(Luke 18:1-8)

Rejoice always - pray without ceasing.

(1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

(Hebrews 11:6)

13. A Worldly Request: You may have been asking for something that is not good or wise in the eyes of God.

So often we ask for things that seem good to us but are not good in God's estimation. He sees truths that we are unable to see or grasp. It is important that we always yield to the omniscient will of God and His evaluation of what will ultimately be for our good.

Ask and it will be given to you. . . . Everyone who asks receives. . . . How much more will your Father in heaven give

good gifts to those who ask Him!

(Matthew 7:7a, 8a, 11c)

14. Wrong Motives: It may be that you have been praying with wrong motives, such as praying to be seen by men.

You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.

(James 4:2d-3b)

(The scribes and Pharisees) do all their deeds to be seen by others.

(Matthew 23:5)

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven…..And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

(Matthew 6:1-6)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

(Matthew 23:23)

For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

(Hebrews 4:12-13)

15. Selfishness: You may have been asking for your greeds rather than your needs.

In the same way that parents refuse to feed their children harmful foods, so God doesn't provide answers to prayer that are excessive or unhealthy.

My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in

glory in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:19, NASB)

16. Lack of Divine Intimacy: You may not be living out of an intimately loving relationship with God.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

(Matthew 22:27)

If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

(John 15:7-8, NASB)

In the "High Priestly Prayer", Jesus prayed to His Father……

….that they (believers) may have the full measure of My joy within them….that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

(John 17:13c, 21)

17. Idolatry: You may not have sought, received, examined and appropriately responded to God's revelation of idolatry in your life - intellectual or otherwise.

There are many behaviors that the Bible calls idolatry - sexual sin, for example.

Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous - that is, an idolater - has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

(Ephesians 5:3-5)

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

(Colossians 3:5)

I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may

take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. And they shall return your lewdness upon you, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry, and you shall know that I am the Lord God.

(Ezekiel 23:48-49)

By committing sexual sin, we are placing our hope for identity, fulfillment and desire for ultimate pleasure in the *creatur*e rather than the *Creator*.

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen!

(Romans 1:24-25)

In doing so, we are placing another god before Him.

You shall have no other gods before Me.

(Exodus 20:3)

Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from Me through their idols.

(Ezekiel 14:1-5)

On the other hand, we commit *intellectual* idolatry when our view of, attitude toward, or obedience to God is dependent on whether or not our prayer is answered in the way we think it should be. God can never answer a prayer that is based on such thinking. If He did, He would be rewarding and encouraging our idolatrous request.

For the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the

debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

(1 Corinthians 1:18-21)

I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

(1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.

(John 5:39)

Let me illustrate the question of why God allows evil to happen to His people - especially the youngest ones. It use to rattle my view of and faith in God. In fact, it angered me and prevented me from giving myself completely to Him. One night, as I was putting the question to God for the umpteenth time, He responded by saying, "You don't know why I allow evil to happen to people do you?" "No I don't", I replied. He then said: "What you're really asking is: How can I love you and allow you to be deeply hurt?" I responded, "Now that You mention it Lord, that's exactly what I'm asking." He replied: "I showed My love for you on the Cross, and when the Cross becomes enough proof for you, then you will find the peace that you are seeking. So why don't you live out of what you *do* know rather than what you *don't* know?" I was stunned by His answer!

Job was challenged in the same way. After God allowed Satan to destroy his health, his family and all his possessions, Job was left with the choice of believing in the goodness of God, or not. Job pressed God for an explanation. His reply: "Who is this that darkens My counsel with words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand!" (Job 38) Again, a stunning answer!

In the face of unbelievable suffering, Job proclaims:

Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!

(Job 13:15)

18. Impoverished Love: You may lack a genuine love for God, the brethren and/or those who do not know God.

Love can be *measured, and is rewarded* accordingly…….

Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.

(Luke 6:38)

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

(Ephesians 3:17b-19, NIV)

For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what he has done.

(Matthew 16:27)

(See also Romans 2:6; Psalm 62:12b; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Colossians 3:23-24; Matthew 10:41-42)

Although love may have accompanying feelings, love is not mere feelings. *Love is sacrifice* - first, God's sacrifice for us…..

We love because He first loved us.

(1 John 4:19)

…..then, ours for God……

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

(John 14:15)

…..then, we for the brethren……

By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

(1 John 3:16-18)

(See also John 13:34-35; Philippians 2:4; Proverbs 17:9)

…..and finally, we for the lost…..

And He said to them, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men."

(Matthew 4:19)

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

(Matthew 5:16)

Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

(James 5:20)

Although love may express itself with words, love is not merely a matter of words, but action.

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth.

(1 John 3:18)

God *is* love (1 John 4:8b, 10, 16b). It is a constituent part of His very being. And He left us an example of how to express love - by sacrificing Himself for others.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

(1 John 3:14)

The way to cultivate more love is by developing a deeper relationship with God the Father.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

(John 15:4-5)

According to Scripture, one way to love is to serve the poor. If we neglect to do so, God's Word says that we won't find answers to our prayers.

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

(Proverbs 21:13)

Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.

(Matthew 19:21)

To truly love is to love not only God, but your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31).

Some people do not know how to love because it was never modeled or taught them. I believe that there is special grace for such individuals. God is patient and will help any person who wants to increase their capacity to love (1 Corinthians 13).

19. Not God's Will: You may have been asking for things that are not according to His will.

We can, of course, learn God's will through the renewal of the mind wrought by His Word, and by other means as well.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

(1 John 5:14)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

20. Unformed Will: You may not have been seeking God, His kingdom and His will with all your heart.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things [referring to the basic needs of life] *will be given to you as well.*

(Matthew 6:33)

Seek the Lord your God and you will find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul.

(Deuteronomy 4:29)

(See also Jeremiah 29:13-14)

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

(Philippians 2:12-13)

21. Fasting: Your request may be the kind that requires not only prayer, but fasting.

On one occasion, Jesus' disciples were unable to cast a demon out of a boy. When asked, Jesus explained…….

This kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting.
(Mark 9:17-29, KJV)

This Scripture has long puzzled scholars because there is no obvious explanation for why, in this case, fasting needed to be added to prayer in order for the disciples to see results. Some suggest that it was because of the higher order of demon that was involved in the boy's affliction. Others suggest that His disciples were too green to cast the spirit out without the extra power drawn by fasting.

One 4th century Church Father, Saint Jerome, had this to say about the incident…..

The Lord Himself consecrated His baptism by a forty days' fast, and taught us that the more violent devils cannot be overcome except by prayer and fasting.

It may be as simple as understanding that, for the Jew, fasting was a natural adjunct to prayer. At the least, the passage illustrates that there are different ranks of demons that are arranged in a hierarchy of authority and power (Ephesians 6:10-12). (See my book, Angels & Archangels & All the Powers of Heaven: A Primer.)

(For other examples of how fasting was used in the Bible, consult Matthew 4:1-2; 6:16-18; 2 Samuel 1:12; 12:16; Daniel 9:3-5; Joel 2:12-13; Jonah 3:5-9; Acts 13:2-4; 14:23; Luke 2:37; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4; Psalm 35:13-14; 69:10; 1 Kings 21:25-27)

22. The Name of Jesus: You may not have been asking in Jesus' name.

In antiquity, the Jews referred to God as "Yahweh". It was a name that was forbidden for them to write or pronounce. So, they instead referred to Him as "HaShem" or "the Name" (cf. Leviticus 24:11 and Deuteronomy 28:58).

Interestingly, when seen from above, the three main valleys of Jerusalem (Gehenna, Kidron and Tyropoean) form the Hebrew letter "shin", which forms the first part of God's name, YVWH, or in its anglicized form, "YHWH" or "Yahweh". The name means, "I Am that I Am" which is the name given to Moses by God at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14-15.

In John 8:58, Jesus referred to Himself as "I Am" which caused the Jews to picked up stones to kill Him. In John 10:33 they explained why: "Because

You, a mere man, claim to be God".

Since Jesus *is* God, to pray "in the name of Jesus" means to pray according to His immutable characteristics. He is:

- God incarnate, Savior, Lord, Redeemer, Teacher, Friend
- the name above all names
- in possession of a flawlessly righteous character
- in possession of limitless power
- in possession of unequaled authority

Behold, I (Jesus) have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.

(Luke 10:19)

I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it.

(John 14:13-14)

You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you.

(John 15:16)

….Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

(John 16:23b-24)

The ability to successfully ask for something "in Jesus' name" presumes that a foundation of deep knowledge and intimacy with Him has been laid. In order for the power of His name to pour forth, we need to have learned, believed, and come into alignment with who He is, whom He has made us to be, and the gifts that He has given to us.

23. Timing: You may be unaware of the greater or related issues that surround a perfect answer to your prayer.

There is a very important principle in Scripture called "the fullness of time".

The vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end - it will

not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.

(Habakkuk 2:3)

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

(Colossians 4:2)

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

(Psalm 27:14)

There is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

(Ecclesiastes 8:6)

(See also Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 5:6; Isaiah 40:31; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Genesis 18:14).

Briefly stated, God does what is right only when it is the right moment to do it. (See also: Hebrews 10:36; Habakkuk 1:2; Psalm 37:7, 25, 34; Daniel 10:12).

God is omnipotent and omniscient. He has all power and knows all things. However, our expected timing for the answer is often different than His. Sometimes, His answer is a *quick* "Yes", while in other cases, a *delayed* "Yes". At other times, the answer is "No" because the matter is outside of His will - a determination often based on factors unknown to us.

If you are to successfully bake a cake, you will need the right ingredients, mixed in the right order and at the right time, using the right-sized pan, in an oven set to the right temperature and baked for the right amount of time. If you don't do all of those things correctly, the cake will be a disaster.

God may be waiting for an increase in our faith and fervency so that we more deeply appreciate the answer. Appreciated answers have legs in God's economy.

24. Eternal Purposes: Your request may not be in accord with God's ultimate plans and purposes.

Although He lets the free will of men run its course, God will not answer prayer that interferes with His eternal plans and purposes.

For example, since He is a God who raises up kings and takes them down (Daniel 2:21), if you pray for a certain candidate to win, a certain country to be victorious in battle, the vanquishing of certain principalities and powers, a

child to go to college, live in a certain place or hold a certain job, God may have a greater and more long-term reason for not answering such prayers.

God's eternal plans and purposes include…..

- destroying the work of the devil (1 John 3:8c)

- crushing Satan under our feet (Romans 16:20a; Psalm 108:13)

- combining Jew & Gentile into "one new man" (Ephesians 2:15)

- reconciling all things to Christ (Ephesians 1:4-6; Romans 8:19-21)

- saving all who come to Him in faith and repentance (1 Timothy 2:3-5)

- re-establising relationship and fellowship with man (Romans 5:1; 5:10; Ephesians 2:14-16; Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; John 14:6)

- summing up all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:7-10; 18-23; 3:10-11; Colossians 1:15-20)

- saving all who come to Him from the consequences of their sins and bringing judgment on those who refuse (John 6:35-40: Luke 12:49; Revelation 21:8)

The Short List

In brief, answers to prayer come most often when you are…….

- in a saving relationship with God
- fully engaged in guarding your heart and mind
- fully engaged in the renewing of your mind
- sufficiently grounded in God's Word that you have a good understanding of its principles
- no longer grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit through sinful behavior
- living in harmony with your spouse
- no longer in love with the world and the things of the world
- no longer living with unforgiveness toward anyone
- reconciled with everyone, to the degree that they have made it possible
- so much in love with Jesus that you approach Him with the respect and reverence that He deserves
- asking in faith, without doubting
- persisting in prayer
- asking for "good gifts" (by God's definition)
- asking with godly motives
- asking for something that you need (as opposed to something you merely fancy)
- in an abiding (lasting and intimate) relationship with God
- seeking *first* His kingdom and righteousness
- asking from a place of love for God and all men
- asking in accordance with His will
- asking while seeking God with all your heart in every way
- fasting as necessary for the more difficult situations
- asking *in His name* (by His power, authority and according to His

character)

• trusting God for His perfect timing in bringing the answer

• yielding to the possibility that the greater purposes of God in salvation history must take precedence above all things

Once you have met these and possibly other criteria, God will answer your prayer, supply all your needs, and provide you with "good gifts" from above (James 1:17).

If you are a new believer, God will probably not require adherence to all of the criteria listed above. He will respond according to the light that you have. However, He will call you to grow in faith, which will lead you into all truth, with its accompanying responsibilities (John 16:13-14; John 8:31-32).

Prayer forces us to decide whether God is good or not. When the fat lady finally sings, we will completely understand the reasons for the parameters that He has established and praise Him for them. Then begins the wonderful life.

Ultimately, the chief end of prayer is that the Father be glorified (John 14:13). It is in knowing Him that we can be set free from the things of this world and the entanglements of the kingdom of darkness.

In his classic book, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray's offers this prayer to the Father…..

Blessed Lord Jesus! I come again to Thee. Every lesson Thou givest me convinces me more deeply how little I know to pray aright. But every lesson also inspires me with hope that Thou art going to teach me, that Thou art teaching me not only to know what prayer should be, but actually to pray as I ought. O my Lord! I look with courage to Thee, the Great Intercessor, who didst pray and dost hear prayer, only that the Father may be glorified, to teach me too to live and to pray to the glory of God.

Savior! To this end I yield myself to Thee again. I would be nothing. I have given self, as already crucified with Thee, to the death. Through the Spirit its workings are mortified and made dead; Thy life and Thy love of the Father are taking possession of me. A new longing begins to fill my soul, that every day, every hour, that in every prayer the glory of the Father may be everything to me. O my Lord! I am in Thy school to learn this: teach Thou it me.

And do Thou, the God of glory, the Father of glory, my God and my Father, accept the desire of a child who has seen that Thy glory is indeed alone worth living for. O Lord! Show me Thy glory. Let it overshadow me. Let it fill the temple of my heart. Let

me dwell in it as revealed in Christ. And do Thou Thyself fulfill in me Thine own good pleasure, that Thy child should find his glory in seeking the glory of his Father. Amen.

About the Author

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